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*Fig. 1. Bronze Wine Jar**

Chou Dynasty (B. C. 1122-255)

*H., .298m.; D., .248m.



Fig. 2. Libation Cup*

Chou Dynasty
(B. C. 1122-255)



Fig. 3. Libation Cup†

Chou Dynasty
(B. C. 1122-255)

The Collection of Chinese Bronzes

THE more one delves into the past the more one feels that to the rites attending death we owe a large part of what was most precious, most essential, in the unrecorded life of dead generations; and that the oblivion which covered such treasures from us has preserved them for us. Certainly is this true of the bronzes which have survived from the great past of China. Most of them at some time or other have been hidden away in the earth as part of the furniture of tombs, and most of those which are inscribed show that they were made to commend to one generation the virtues of another, or to recall the qualities of the fathers in whose honor they are dedicated. Many of them were ritual vessels for use in the shrines or the temples of the sacred dead. But whatever their use, whatever the intention which fashioned them, they have been preserved to us in almost every instance because they were buried and forgotten.

Since bronze is a remarkably durable material, the superficial results from its burial are often most happy. The "earth acids" with which a buried bronze comes in contact act upon it slightly or intensely as the case may be, and produce under varying conditions of temperature and moisture the multi-colored patinas which, to the lover of bronze, are so charming an accident. Sometimes the resulting color is uniform; sometimes it is a blend of tints. Often the color appears as incrustation, or as exudation; and sometimes the exudations seem to be pure metal (copper, for instance) which has separated itself from its fellows in the alloy and spread itself over portions of the surface. Sometimes the copper seems to have been dissolved and then precipitated as actual malachite. These are matters but little understood as yet; but the beautiful result of all such action is part of the charm of Chinese bronzes.

The other charms lie in the forms and the decoration. And herein we find the artistic value of Chinese bronzes such as belong to the Museum. Patina on old bronzes should always be an accident, though careful handling may enhance its beauty and give it depth of tone and richness of sur-

face. But form and decoration are man's thought made concrete by application of his skill. At a very early age Chinese workmen knew not only how to cast and chisel bronze vessels, but how to proportion them, how to express through them ideas of beauty,—in this instance a sense of superhuman, creative forces in the world of which man is but a creature. Of tentative steps or primitive stages of development nothing is known as yet. Always is there vigor in the proportions of their vessels, in the relation of part to part, in the spring of curve, in the rounding of surface. Similar strength is found in the decoration: that is drawn and modeled powerfully and boldly, as in Fig. 3, or exquisitely, as in Figs. 4 and 5, but never weakly. One technical reason for the vigor in outline of the designs employed is that they seem always conceived on a rectangular plan. Beyond all that, however, there is an appropriateness in the decoration of Chinese bronzes. From bells bearing the symbol of lightning against a background of clouds to mirrors with emblems of domestic felicity, there is a wide field for the study of decoration which is full of meaning.

The Museum Collection of Chinese bronzes consists of mirrors, a few weapons and bells, and vessels of various kinds. From among the latter five have been selected for illustration because they represent the collection fairly in beauty of patina and in interest. Four of them (Figs. 1 to 5) are recent acquisitions and are now for the first time on exhibition. Of these the covered wine-jar shown in Fig. 1 is a remarkable example of what the fortunate action of the earth on bronze may be; for the incrustation has so thoroughly protected the vessel that the metal retains apparently its fine original quality, and the decorative modeling is unimpaired. The color of the incrustation, which overran the inside as well as the outside of the jar, is a shaded deep green, dry and easily scaled in places and occasionally of a malachite richness to the touch. Where it has scaled off, a silvery "water patina" appears of the color of lichens on field stones after rain. It is occasionally interrupted by splashes

*H., .159m.; D., .307m.
†H., .140m.; D., .266m.

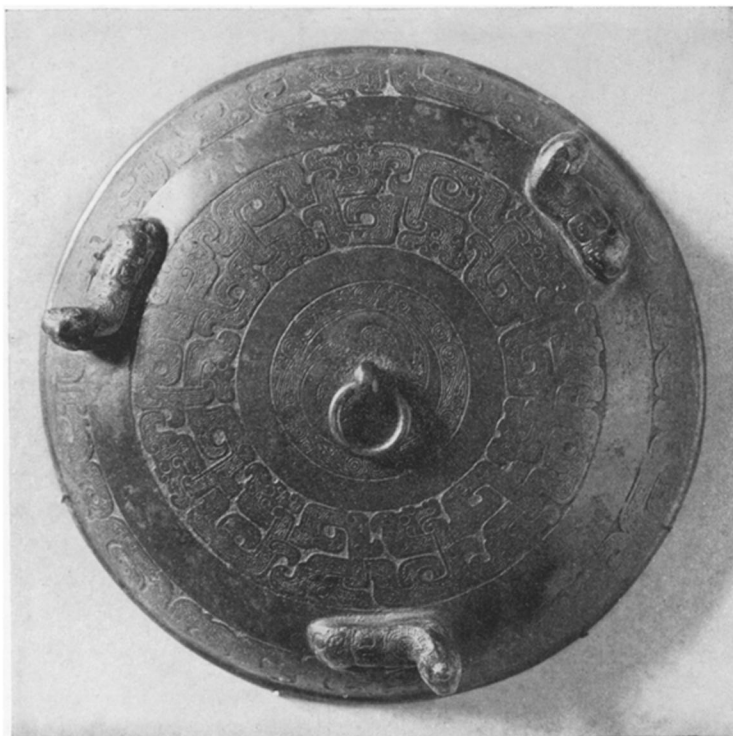


Fig. 4. Cover of Tripod

Ch'in Dynasty (B. C. 255-206)



*Fig. 5. Tripod**

Ch'in Dynasty (B. C. 255-206)

H., .195m.; D., 204m.



Fig. 6. *Ritual Cooking Vessel**

Han Dynasty (B. C. 206–A. D. 221) or earlier?

of bronze-brown and sometimes it merges into the tone of old mercury. Beneath the incrustation the bands of rectangular dragons show clearly, the fine strength of their lines heightened in value by the bold relief of the ox-heads which interrupt them and the tapir-like ends of the bail. Altogether, the jar is a triumph of Chinese bronze casting and designing.

The libation cups shown in Figs. 2 and 3 are of the kind used in ancestral temples, and are admirably devised for the ceremony in which they were raised high with both hands before the gods. They have both been preserved by generations of owners and owe their richness of color to much contact with human hands. In the larger of the two the color is especially lovely — splashes of jade green and the rose of worn agate shading to buff brown nearly cover a lustrous bronze-brown surface. The smaller cup is a dull bronze-brown, nearly black, of the tone which time above ground alone produces.

The surface of the covered tripod (Figs. 4 and 5), originally a golden bronze, is now beautifully varied with buff clay-color, rose, rose cinnabar, and green merging into deep lapis blue. Like that of the libation cups, the patina of this vessel is the result of handling, and in this instance the handling was deliberate: the incrustations have been rubbed down and the color deepened by a slight application of oil. The result is to bring out the full value of the decoration. That consists

of four decorative elements: a version of the rectangular dragons, intertwined in two of the bands, covered with scale markings and water spirals (the latter appear again in the circular space about the ring handle on the cover); dragons again and a cord of two strands on the handles; the storm-monster head at the top of each of the legs; and three reclining crested tigers in full relief on the cover. So far as may be guessed, the work belongs to the brief period which built the great wall against the enemies of China and began all things anew.

The cooking vessel shown in Fig. 6 is of a deep green-bronze color, enlivened by a dry turquoise green which has aged in minute accumulations to the brilliant green of jadeite. It is decorated with intertwined dragons drawn, as we have found them before, according to the requirements of a rectangular plan. Their resemblance to the dragons on the tripod (Fig. 5) will be seen at a glance, and they are interesting to compare with those on a mirror illustrated in an earlier number of the Bulletin.[†] Less carefully finished than the tripod, it is no less noble in its considered simplicity than the other vessels illustrated; and like all the bronzes in the Museum Collection, it affords to those who care for color, for harmonious design, or for vigor of form, a subtle and lasting pleasure. F. S. K.

* H., .285m.; D., .375m.

[†] Fig. 1 in the Bulletin for April, 1908.